

AMERICA'S ONGOING DENIAL
OF THE
DEADLIEST
PRISONER MASSACRE
IN ITS HISTORY

YAHYA LINDH

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of Allāh, Most Merciful, Most Compassionate

“There must have been three thousand of them,” he murmured.
“What?”

“The dead,” he clarified. “It must have been everyone at the station.”

The woman measured him with a pitying look. “There haven’t been any dead here,” she said...¹

“You must have been dreaming,” the officers insisted. “Nothing has happened in Macondo. Nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will happen. This is a happy town.”²

- *Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude*

In the final week of November 2001, a group of CIA and Special Forces operatives oversaw the massacre of a convoy of Taliban soldiers who had been captured in northern Afghanistan.³ Thousands of detainees were asphyxiated,⁴ burned,⁵ beaten to death,⁶ buried alive,⁷ frozen,⁸ drowned,⁹ dismembered,¹⁰ and shot with their hands tied behind their backs.¹¹ The carnage was covered widely in the international media as details gradually emerged, but few Americans seemed to notice.¹²

The decision to deny prisoners any rights whatsoever in what George W. Bush described as “this crusade, this war on terrorism”¹³ was based in part on an 1873 Supreme Court decision stating that “the laws and customs of civilized warfare may not be applicable to an armed conflict with the Indian tribes upon our western frontier.”¹⁴

This decision was consistent with longstanding American military policy. As early as 1807, Thomas Jefferson had advocated a similar approach: “If we are constrained to lift the hatchet against any tribe, we will never lay it down till that tribe is exterminated . . . they will kill some of us; we shall destroy all of them.”¹⁵

The convoy of Taliban mujahideen in northern Afghanistan in 2001 was captured by US-led forces through a broken treaty, also consistent with longstanding American military policy.

The initial phase of the US-led Afghan invasion was orchestrated by a small group of CIA operatives alongside American and British Special Operations

soldiers who called in airstrikes and commanded a much larger force of local militiamen who served as their regular troops. The Northern Alliance was a coalition of warlords notorious for pedophilia, drug trafficking, rape, and extreme brutality. They had been responsible for killing over 50,000 Kabul residents and destroying much of the city during the 1990s, but now they were America's boots on the ground.¹⁶

"We are very grateful to the Americans," Northern Alliance spokesman Qudratullah Hurmat told the New York Times in early November. "They are organizing the troops and telling our commanders what to do."¹⁷

As the Taliban government was collapsing across Afghanistan, a division of about 8,000 mujahideen found itself surrounded in the city of Kunduz. The destruction of civilian areas in and around the city caused by American aerial bombardment convinced Taliban leaders to try to negotiate the peaceful surrender of the city.¹⁸

Despite entreaties by some Kunduz residents to fight off the invaders and collaborators at all costs, an agreement was made with Northern Alliance leader Abdul Rashid Dostum guaranteeing the mujahideen safe passage westward from Kunduz through Mazar-e-Sharif to Herat, which was still under Taliban control.

The convoy of trucks began to move out of the city on the evening of November 23.

The American-led force had no intention of fulfilling the agreement. Once the first group of trucks was on the road, dozens of US Special Forces alongside Northern Alliance militiamen redirected them to the Qala-e-Jangi fortress near Mazar-e-Sharif, where they were taken captive.¹⁹ The rest of the convoy was brought to another fortress further west called Qala-e-Zeini. Instead of granting them safe passage to Herat, the Americans were commandeering the convoy to Dostum's hometown, Sheberghan, where they too were now based. Some of the 8,000 mujahideen would be imprisoned there, but most would be killed en route and buried in mass graves in the nearby Dasht-e-Leili desert.

Northern Alliance commander Rahmatullah explained, "We used trucks to transport them. They were surrounded by soldiers. There weren't any buses, so we used lorries for their transportation."

He was asked about the containers.

"Containers? Oh, no. It's not good to mention them," he said.

"It's between you and me," he was told.

"We put some of the prisoners in containers," he admitted.²⁰

"They told us to stop the trucks, and we came down," a truck driver said. "After that, they shot into the containers. Blood came pouring out of the containers. They were screaming inside."²¹

Another driver described how he and his truck were pressed into service by the American-led force: "We were coming in from Mazar when they seized our trucks for free and took us to Qala-e-Zeini, where there were already a lot of trucks. At about 2:00 am, they loaded our trucks with the prisoners. We were to the north of Qala-e-Zeini where we loaded the trucks."²²

"The weather was very hot," an eyewitness recalled. "They put too many people inside the containers. Many died because there was no air."²³

"There were about twenty-five containers," another witness said, with each container holding 250 prisoners or more.²⁴ "The condition of them was very bad, because the prisoners couldn't breathe, so they shot into the containers, and some of them were killed."²⁵

"The Americans were in charge," an eyewitness said. "They were standing at the front gates, where the prisoners were."²⁶

A local taxi driver recalled, "I smelled something strange and asked the attendant where the smell was coming from. He said, 'Look behind you.' There were three trucks with containers fixed on them. Blood was running from the containers. My hair stood on end. It was horrific."²⁷

"I hit the containers with bullets to make holes for ventilation, and some of them were killed," a Northern Alliance militiaman recalled. "My commanders ordered me to hit the containers to make holes for ventilation, and because of that, some prisoners died."²⁸

"When we got to Sheberghan prison, there were some Americans and some Afghan soldiers," a truck driver said. "They wanted to unload the trucks, and they were taking charge of the area."

When asked how many Americans there were, he responded: "About 150 to 160. We didn't count the number... There were so many Americans, and they were all armed and wearing their uniforms."²⁹

"I shall never forget the sensation as long as I live," said one Northern Alliance militiaman. "It was the most revolting and most powerful stench you could ever imagine: a mixture of feces, urine, blood, vomit and rotting flesh. It was a smell to make you forget all other smells you ever experienced in your life."³⁰

Special Agent Dell Spry, head FBI agent at Guantánamo Bay in 2002, informed bureau headquarters about consistent accounts he was hearing from detainees of a massacre overseen by US personnel in northern Afghanistan the year before.³¹ He believed that the incident deserved to be investigated because, as he reasoned, "someday it may turn out to be a problem."³² A senior official at FBI headquarters told him to drop the issue and leave it to the Pentagon to investigate.³³

"Central Command looked into it and found no evidence of participation or knowledge or presence," Pentagon spokesman David Lapan said. "Our guys weren't there, didn't watch and didn't know about it – if indeed anything like that happened."³⁴

"They suffocated. Died, not killed. Nobody killed anybody," Northern Alliance spokesman Faizullah Zaki explained.³⁵

One of the truck drivers shook uncontrollably as he described what he had witnessed at Qala-e-Zeini.³⁶

"At the White House, nobody said no to an investigation, but nobody ever said yes either," explained Pierre Prosper, a Bush Administration official responsible for investigating war crimes. "The first reaction of everybody there was, 'Oh, this is a sensitive issue; this is a touchy issue politically.'"³⁷

In a 2009 interview, CNN reporter Anderson Cooper asked Barack Obama about whether he would support an investigation into the killings:

ANDERSON COOPER: Some were suffocated in a steel container, others were shot, possibly buried in mass graves. Would you support – would you call for – an investigation into possible war crimes in Afghanistan?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Yeah, the indications that this had not been properly investigated just recently was brought to my attention. So what I've asked my national security team to do is to collect the facts for me that are known. And we'll probably make a decision in terms of how to approach it once we have all the facts gathered up.³⁸

When questioned in June 2013 about the status of the investigation, White House officials said they were still “looking into” the massacre. A month later, White House spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden announced there was “no plan to release anything.”³⁹

The total death toll was about 5,000 according to Amir Jan Naseri, a Northern Alliance commander who helped negotiated the convoy's safe passage to Herat.⁴⁰ Taliban co-founder Abdul Salam Zaeef, who was also involved in the negotiations, mentioned the same number.⁴¹

While the mass slaughter of Taliban prisoners failed to spark much interest in the United States, it did not go unnoticed among Afghans. In December 2001, Journalist Robert Fisk encountered a crowd of Afghan refugees near Chaman at the Afghan-Pakistan border who “were outraged by what they had seen on television of the Mazar massacres, of prisoners killed with their hands tied behind their backs,” and “the videotape of two CIA officers threatening death to a kneeling prisoner.” Mistaking Fisk for George W. Bush, a group of them nearly beat and stoned him to death.⁴²

According to General Jarobak, warden of the prison at Sheberghan, “many, many, many prisoners” died between December 2001 and January 2002.⁴³ Some died of medical neglect, starvation, or disease.⁴⁴ Others were murdered by guards, as survivor Bashir Ahmad told a McClatchy reporter: “The Northern Alliance soldiers were very cruel. They asked a Taliban commander to shave his beard. He refused. They took him off and chopped off one arm, and then another, and then they killed him.”⁴⁵

Yet even the Northern Alliance guards were astounded at the cruelty of their American allies. One said he witnessed US troops stabbing prisoners in the leg and cutting out their tongues.⁴⁶ “Sometimes, it looked as if they were doing it for pleasure,” he said. “They would take a prisoner outside, beat him up and return him to the jail. But sometimes, they were never returned and they disappeared.”⁴⁷

Another guard watched an American interrogator kill a Taliban prisoner to frighten others into talking. “The Americans did whatever they wanted,” he recalled. “We had no power to stop them. Everything was under the control of the American commander.”⁴⁸

Historian Andy Worthington estimates that a total of about 120 of the 3,000 survivors held at Sheberghan were later transferred to Guantánamo Bay,

comprising about 15% of the 779 detainees sent there.⁴⁹ Their experiences were recorded in interrogation logs and transcripts of administrative proceedings, such as the following exchange at Walid Haj's Administrative Review Board hearing in March 2006:

DESIGNATED MILITARY OFFICER: Konduz, Afghanistan, became surrounded and the Taliban said they reached an agreement with General Dostum's forces allowing the Pakistanis and Arabs to withdraw through Mazar-e-Sharif... The detainee and the others got on a truck unarmed and went on their way to Herat, Afghanistan, being led by vehicles from General Dostum's forces.

ASSISTING MILITARY OFFICER (for detainee): Yes, to travel to my country and the proof is that the truck didn't have weapons in it and we didn't want to fight, but Dostum tricked us and entered us in a big castle and fired bullets at us and killed more than 350 brothers while they were handcuffed/tied with ropes and I was hit with a bullet while I was cuffed/tied up and after that the Americans came and took us to Kandahar and later to Cuba... The bullet is in my stomach until now, I suffer pain until now, and I have been asking for clinic help for three years and I haven't had any answer from them.⁵⁰

American occupation forces in Afghanistan would continue to make a sport out of murdering Muslim detainees. On December 4, 2002, American soldiers at Bagram tortured Uruzgan resident Mulla Habibullah to death by shackling his wrists to the ceiling for days, kneeling him in the groin, and repeatedly subjecting him to peroneal strikes, all the while ridiculing him and laughing at the large amount of phlegm he continued to cough up.⁵¹

A taxi driver named Dilawar from the small village of Yakubi in Khost Province was tortured to death less than a week later at the same facility by being shackled to the ceiling for days, kicked in the groin, thrown into a wall, kned in the chest, slammed onto a table, and subjected to over 100 peroneal strikes. Military police later explained that they subjected Dilawar to this treatment because they found it amusing to hear him cry out: "Allah! Allah!"⁵²

On January 15, 2010, in the remote village of La Mohammad Kalay in Qandahar Province, a group of American soldiers approached a 15-year-old agricultural laborer named Gul Mudin while he was at work on his father's farm.

They stopped him, and he did not attempt to resist or flee.

The American troops then threw a grenade at the boy and opened fire at point-blank range with their machine guns. After he fell facedown in the dirt, they shot him two more times.

Pfc. Andrew Holmes – who had never killed a Muslim before – proceeded to strip the boy's body. He then had himself photographed holding up the exposed corpse by the hair.

He cut off the boy's pinky finger to keep as a trophy. Afterwards, he would

carry it with him in a zip-lock bag.

"Most people within the unit disliked the Afghan people," one of the soldiers later explained. "Everyone would say they're savages."⁵³

The Maliki jurist Abu Bakr ibn ul-Arabi (d. 1148) said: "It is established that killing an animal without due justification is prohibited, so what about killing a human being? Then what about a Muslim?"⁵⁴

According to an authentic hadith, "The murder of a believer is greater in magnitude to Allah than if the entire world were to disappear."⁵⁵

A group of researchers at American University in Washington, DC published a report in September 2020 concluding that America's post-9/11 wars had caused between 770,000 and 801,000 violent deaths as well as 4,000,000 to 12,000,000 deaths through hunger, disease, and other causes.⁵⁶ Across the United States, public reactions were reminiscent of the words of American Ambassador to Egypt (1949-1955) Jefferson Caffery: "I do not understand why anybody should be bothered about the fate of ten million niggers."⁵⁷

A year later in September 2021, the violent death toll was estimated at between 897,000 and 929,000,⁵⁸ but still few Americans seemed to notice. Even after generating a total cost of \$8,000,000,000,000,⁵⁹ reducing several Muslim countries to ruins, and producing between 37,000,000 and 59,000,000 refugees and internally displaced persons,⁶⁰ most American taxpayers continue to view these wars of aggression with cold indifference.

The American people are not unaware of the monstrous crimes committed in their name. They simply do not care.

¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad*, 11th ed. (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1990), 345.

² Ibid, 347.

³ Ahmed S. Younis, "Imputing War Crimes in the War on Terrorism: The U.S., Northern Alliance, and 'Container Crimes,'" *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice*, Spring 2003, 118.

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⁷ Andy Worthington, *The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 21.

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¹³ George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President Upon Arrival," September 16, 2001.

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¹⁴ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 224.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Henry Dearborn," August 28, 1807.

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¹⁶ Robert Fisk, "What Will the Northern Alliance Do in Our Name Now? I Dread to Think..." *The Independent*, November 14, 2001.

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